

National broadcasting policy

It brooks no slapdash approach

THE national broadcasting policy (NBP) is set to be placed for approval at the cabinet next month. This is a matter of serious national importance as it is a pointer as to how the flow of information is maintained in democracy. As such, before taking a final shape, the draft policy on broadcasting demands sufficient public debate to ensure that it is time-befitting and meeting the need of all stakeholders, and whether there is indeed need for a policy at all.

We are not aware if the government has allowed such open discussion among various stakeholders. In this context, the information minister's assurance that the NBP to be approved by the cabinet would ensure desired development of mass media and protect public interest doesn't sound convincing.

But what we see in actual practice is antithetical to what the government is promising. For the public are still in the dark about what the draft NBP ready for cabinet approval actually contains. They do not know if it is going to curtail or increase media freedom.

It would be ill-advised if the government pushes through the NBP in a slapdash manner at the fag end of its present tenure. It has to be ensured that the NBP does not impinge on the press freedom keeping an eye on the fine line between the rights and obligations of the stakeholders.

So, to avoid the risk of creating another black law, the government must invite open discussion among all stakeholders before sending the draft broadcasting policy to the cabinet for approval.

ADP implementation dips

Poor show!

FOR the first time in recent memory, implementation of the annual development plan (ADP) has gone down in an election year. Prior experience shows that every elected government speeds up implementation of projects, particularly priority ones, when a general election draws near. Not this time round. We are alarmed to find that the highest rate of implementation stands at a mere 15 per cent by local government, while health and family welfare takes the cake for second lowest implementation at 2 per cent.

To put it more bluntly, of the 54 ministries in government, 22 implemented approximately 0 – 2 per cent of their allocations. Naturally the slow pace with which some of the biggest projects in the power sector are being implemented has become a major headache for policymakers. Even more embarrassing is the fact that the Padma Bridge project that received the third largest allocation in the budget has managed to expend a mere 0.13 per cent of its allocation.

We are distressed that infrastructure has taken such a bad hit. The sorry state of roads and highways hardly need to be highlighted. Yet when we find that the roads division has managed to implement only 5 per cent of the development budget of one of the most crucial projects of the country, i.e. the Dhaka-Chittagong four-lane, there is little left to be said. The overall situation points to a reduced capacity of the ministries to implement development programmes timely and that does not admit of any excuse.

What people think



Friday: September 20, 2013

Do you agree with Transparency International UK that defence sectors of Bangladesh and 20 other countries are at very risk of corruption?

Yes	(89%)
No	(11%)

Saturday: September 21, 2013

Do you think the government decision not to charge the reckless drivers for intentional killing is justified?

Yes	(10%)
No	(90%)

Sunday: September 22, 2013

Do you agree with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that a vested quarter is hindering the country's progress through spreading religious fanaticism and propaganda?

Yes	(28%)
No	(72%)

Monday: September 23, 2013

Do you agree with Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu that the government will take action against persons found involved in the Padma bridge graft?

Yes	(12%)
No	(88%)

Tuesday: September 24, 2013

Do you think Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad will be able to broker dialogue among political parties to solve the present crisis?

Yes	(10%)
No	(90%)

Wednesday: September 25, 2013

Do you think that the demand for a rise in minimum monthly wage to Tk 8,114 from Tk 3,000 of the RMG workers is justified?

Yes	(68%)
No	(32%)

Thursday: September 26, 2013

Do you think it was justified for BNP leader Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir to blame Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan for the ongoing labour unrest?

Yes	(80%)
No	(20%)

Backward looking owners of a forward looking industry

Why can't BGMEA see the future that we all seem to see?

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

WE cannot support the vandalism that the workers of some garment factories of Bangladesh have indulged in, in the last few days. For several days now important highways have been blocked and hundreds of cars, buses and trucks have been set on fire by wayward garment workers.

However, BGMEA and others cannot avert the blame that the present spate of violence has been triggered by their offer of Tk.600

pay raise to the Wage Board which is trying to fix new wages for the RMG sector workers.

While the owners are right in saying that vandalism will not get the workers their pay rise and only negotiations will, yet it must be said that the mindset revealed by the owners in the Tk.600 offer forced the workers to conclude that without some bigger action their demands will not be realised.

It boggles the mind, and we have carried several pieces on it already, is how such a pittance could have been offered in the first place. To make it sound respectable BGMEA said they were offering a 20% raise. Given an already low level of Tk.3,000, the 20% amounts to only Tk.600, making for a total of Tk. 3,600. How can this be living wage for anybody who has to pay for lodging, food, transport, medical and necessary family expenses?

We fully endorse the CPD recommendation that the starting wage for a RMG sector worker should be Tk.6,560 to be increased to Tk. 8,200 on completion of one year satisfactory service, which in dollar terms amount to just about \$ 100, making for a daily wage of around \$3. We consider such a minimum wage to be feasible, and a win-win proposition for both sides.

BGMEA's position has always been that high wages will compromise our competitiveness and thereby destroy the industry. This may have been true at some point in the past. Now the reality is that it will be the absence of a reasonable wage for the workers which will compromise our competitiveness and destroy the industry.

It is our view that BGMEA members are stuck in a time warp. They have not evolved with time and are stuck in the thinking that labour is the place where the squeeze has to be the maximum and everywhere else expenses can be adjusted.

It is now a proven fact, in Bangladesh as in everywhere else in the world, that better pay for the workers inevitably results in better profit for the owners. In Bangladesh, those garment factories which are fully compliant with international standards of working condition and those who pay higher salaries are among the more successful companies in the country. It is they who are getting orders from abroad, it is they who are growing faster than others and it is they who have the best prospect for future growth.

With such overwhelming evidence all around, it is incomprehensible that BGMEA should have chosen the path of confrontation with the workers instead of co-operation.

As more and more workers take to the streets their discipline will slacken and propensity to go for such demonstration will increase. Therefore, it will be wise on the part of BGMEA to solve the existing wage issue expeditiously so that workers are still able to trust the owners rather than feel that they will always need to indulge in indiscipline to gain their rights.

What has amazed us further is the 'discovery' of "national

and international" conspiracy by BGMEA leaders, whose purpose, according to them, is to instigate the workers in order to damage the image of our RMG sector. They identified BBC and vernacular daily Prothom Alo as the main culprits, as the former had broadcast a TV programme depicting the miserable state of garment workers and the latter compared garment workers' salary with other sectors and pointed out that it was among the lowest in the country.

What amazes us further is that BGMEA leaders are all seasoned travellers and, since almost all of them sell their products in the US or in Europe, they are necessarily well versed in the practices of western and other free and independent media. So how could they have called the BBC and Prothom Alo reports as "conspiracies"? They could have termed them "inaccurate," "incomplete," "one-sided," "biased" and sent a "rejoinder" or "clarification."

The mindset revealed in terming BBC, one of the most respected and trusted names in international journalism, and Prothom Alo, by far the biggest and trusted newspaper in the country, as "conspirators" is one that is myopic, closed, intolerant of criticism, unwilling to accept their own faults and unable to take responsibility for their own shortcomings.

For many years now we have been hearing BGMEA or their likes term every criticism against them as "conspiracies." Every time the workers demonstrate for their rights, their pay, improvement of their working conditions, it is termed as a "conspiracy." If our garment owners had accepted even a part of the criticism and acted on them, they would have been in a far better situation than now. By terming criticisms as false, they act like the proverbial ostrich burying its head in the sand and thinking that the world can't see them.

Why do buyers have to insist about fire safety, about well constructed factories, about fire exits and the like? Why can't we do these things on our own? I am sure many of the garment owners did and do. But there are many others—in fact too many of them—who don't. It is this delinquent group that is bringing disrepute to the industry.

We salute our garment factory owners for creating such a huge export business for the country earning billions. They also deserve our praise for creating such a huge employment market, and bringing about near revolutionary changes in many aspects. But they must also acknowledge that they pay only 0.8% tax when all other business houses pay 40% corporate tax. This sector has been given many types of regulatory and financial benefits precisely for the above mentioned benefits they brought to the country.

While we give them their due praise we must simultaneously point out that the workers are their partners in creating their turnover, gross income and finally the profit, which, judging by their houses, cars, lifestyle, etc., have been considerable.

There is no question of grudging their wealth as most of them have earned it through hard work, but there definitely is the question of paying reasonable wages for the very workers who help to create their wealth.

With the prospect of exponential growth in this sector, and with Bangladesh poised for embarking on its growth trajectory, the BGMEA is being extremely shortsighted in refusing to accept the stark and fundamental reality that the wages being offered to the workers are not acceptable.

The continued unrest in the RMG sector, and we will not negate the possibility that part of it could be politically instigated, will not do the owners any good, as it will not do any good to the workers either. We urge the owners to be the true forward looking captains of what is definitely one of the most forward looking and prospective industry that the country has at the moment.

The writer is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.

Home minister is the patron saint of driving

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

OUR home minister forgot last week that he was not the law minister, that he was not a one-man parliament or a court judge, who could make or interpret laws or their amendments for that matter. He said drivers couldn't be charged with murder because accidents happened not by willful neglect but by sheer chance. God knows why he thought it was his place in life to call that shot on the nature and gravity of crime and punishment.

We all know he was only stating the obvious. The existing law doesn't allow drivers to be tried under Section 302 for intentional killing anyway. They're tried under Section 304, the maximum punishment being ten years in prison. Yet the minister reinvented the wheel to earn some brownie points from a delegation of transport owners and workers. He said all accident cases filed under Section 302 would be reviewed and withdrawn.

It was the conciliatory tone of his assurance that opened a can of worms. In his other life, the minister was a bureaucrat and he must have diligently studied jurisprudence as part of his job or simply because he took special interest in this subject. But does that make him an authority to proclaim a legal measure for which courts of Bangladesh have got many competent judges? The minister is our chief enforcer, his job being the use of forces at his disposal to maintain law and order.

Does that give him the liberty to decide the merit of any case? The cases he was talking about must have been filed by the families of victims and these cases should be settled in the court of law. How can the minister decide which are accidental and which are intentional? Ideally, drivers shouldn't have reasons for intentional killing. They don't wake up in the morning with a desire to kill some people on the road.

But some of them end up killing either by running people over or losing control of their vehicles. True, they are not always at fault. Pedestrians don't use zebra crossings or foot over-bridges, and they often scoot across busy roads without following traffic rules. Some of them get run over or banged off the roads by drivers whose fault it isn't that those people should throw themselves before speeding vehicles.

There are courts in the country to sort out who is guilty of what.

The minister cannot deny that there are also drivers who are drunk when they drive. Many of them do speeding, and others start driving before they learn. What about these drivers who end up killing people even if they don't want to? Is this involuntary manslaughter? Is this chancy killing just because these drivers didn't do it in a calculative manner?

Premeditated murder by definition is the crime of wrongfully causing the death of another human being after rationally considering its timing or method. The consideration is either to increase the likelihood of success, or to evade detection or apprehension. In short, this type of murder is committed with a certain degree of planning and preparation.

What about the drivers who drive with the knowledge of risks? When they know they haven't learned to drive or drink on the road or disregard speed limits, they are already courting a recipe for disaster. Even when they are working overtime without sleep or rest, they know they are taking a risk.

Doesn't each of these categories formulate a level of planning and preparation? Don't the drivers driving under any of these circumstances do so with the awareness that they could put lives in danger? Doesn't that amount to willful neglect?

Accidents happen all the time. But when the home minister conceded concessions to the transport owners and workers, it sounded like he was pampering the perpetrators in an outlandish manner. The families have the right to claim that their loved ones were murdered by reckless drivers. The drivers have the right to prove that they didn't kill on purpose. It's for the courts to decide which side is right.

Other countries have iron-clad traffic laws. They impose hefty fines for jumping red lights, speeding, switching lanes, failing to yield at crossings, etc., besides endorsing penalty points on a driver's licence. If a driver kills someone in the United States while driving under the influence, he will be charged with felony DUI and at least involuntary manslaughter. If there are prior DUI convictions, some states will charge him with murder rather than manslaughter.

All drivers don't drive under the influence, but many drive with arrogance and audacity. Transport owners and unions save them, but now a patron saint sits with them behind the wheel. Now drivers will drive, driven by the minister's blanket assurance. It'll still be accident even if they intend to kill.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pleasure trip with taxpayers' money!

At first it was announced that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was not going to attend the UNGA but the next day the decision was changed and the prime minister departed to attend the UN General Assembly taking with her a 134-member delegation, the biggest ever entourage since she took office in January 2009.

It has been disclosed that a vast majority of her delegation members will have no work in UN and they will have nothing to do but enjoy the trip through shopping, sightseeing and relaxing in the luxurious hotels during the six-day visit to the United States.

This is taxpayers' money and we protest its wastage in this manner. How could Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina allow spending the hard-earned money of the poor people of Bangladesh in such a way?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

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